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City native enjoyed role in trapping spy

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A Richmond native who spent nearly three years helping the Federal Bureau of Investigation set a trap for a Soviet spy says he enjoyed being a double agent.

"It's the challenge of trying to outsmart the other side," Dr. Armand B. Weiss said today. "It's like a chess game, only the stakes are real."

Dr. Weiss, a consultant and editor of technical publications who lived in Richmond until he was 18, played a crucial role in helping the FBI catch a Soviet embassy official last month with a brief case full of secret government documents.

The official, a Soviet Air Force lieutenant colonel named Yuriy P. Leonov, had obtained the documents minutes before his Aug. 18 arrest outside Dr. Weiss's office in McLean — from Dr. Weiss.

Persona non grata

Within four days, Leonov had been declared persona non grata by the United States government — the harshest measure that can be taken against a Soviet with diplomatic immunity — and expelled from the country.

The incident, which became public last week when the Soviets expelled two Americans accused of being spies, ended an adventure that began for Dr. Weiss when a foreign man walked into his office at Associations International Inc. in December 1980.

The company, of which Dr. Weiss is president, produces publications on research and management techniques that are used by engineers and economists and defense-related agencies. So Leonov's request for one of the firm's publications was not very unusual.

But when the friendly foreigner came back for other documents

and began luring Dr. Weiss into discussions about technical subjects that were somewhat secret, "that's when I decided this fellow must be a spy," Dr. Weiss said.

Called the FBI

He called the FBI and was told that Leonov was under surveillance and that investigators had been watching Dr. Weiss, too, since Leonov had begun visiting him. When an FBI agent asked him to help trap Leonov, Dr. Weiss agreed.

"It was a very easy thing to slip into," he said.

The Soviet wanted many documents that were available publicly, according to Dr. Weiss, and only occasionally asked for information that really was secret.

Dr. Weiss helped get the documents with help from the FBI. He said he came to realize that Leonov, who had acknowledged he was a Soviet diplomat, was an interesting and likable person who was eager to talk politics and argue about Soviet or American policies.

Leonov spoke English poorly, Dr. Weiss said, and didn't fit the James Bond image of the spy as a smooth operator.

"Sometimes I would sit down and and I would think, 'What am I doing to this nice guy?' Then I would think, 'He's doing his job and I'm doing my job,'" Dr. Weiss said.

He said that feeling was strengthened because he is Jewish and had strong feelings about government persecution of Jews living in Russia. Dr. Weiss said he never discussed his religion with Leonov for fear of souring their relationship.

Although Dr. Weiss had worked closely with defense-related agencies because of his expertise in cost-efficiency and management, he said spying was a new sort of experience.

In Richmond, where he still has two sisters and many friends, Dr. Weiss had delivered newspapers, begun his editing career on school and religious publications and become an Eagle Scout. Now 52, he graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School before going on to one year at the University of Richmond. He completed college at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Weiss said his interest in figuring ways to do things efficiently had made him an expert in a field that put him "in touch with a lot of people who are working on defense" projects. He speculated that was the reason the Russians picked him.

Although his wife didn't know of the espionage project until it ended last month, Dr. Weiss' two children, daughter Jo Ann, 25, and son Rhett, 22, sometimes helped the FBI in surveillance of Leonov as he approached or left Dr. Weiss' office.

And, although he had some concerns of the possible dangers of the job, Dr. Weiss said the FBI assured him the odds of physical harm were slight.

Nevertheless, he put his estate in order with the help of a lawyer, and, without saying specifically what he was involved in, asked his rabbi to look out for his family if anything happened to him.

Although the FBI said it would "neither confirm nor deny" Dr. Weiss' account of his involvement in the case, a spokesman acknowledged today that a citizen with technical expertise helped in the investigation of Leonov.

During an interview today, Dr. Weiss referred to Leonov repeatedly as "Yuriy" and said he still has warm feelings toward the 42-year-old former fighter pilot. He was optimistic about the Soviet spy's fate at home in Russia.

"I think he's probably gone back, had a rest and is probably going to teach in some intelligence school on things not to do," he said.